

Mexico City's Spring 2007 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

In accordance with José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's philosophy that good literature should both teach and entertain, the best of Mexican theatre continues to do just that, as evidenced in Mexico City's Spring 2007 season. And excellence was apparent in both adult and children's theatre. Unfortunately, spectators had to be rather dedicated to seeing theatre, as they had to put up with last-minute schedule changes, poorly or inaccurately advertised offerings, and worst of all, a nasty dispute between the Instituto Cultural Helénico and the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, which kept spectators on the street until just before curtain time (crippling cafeteria and lobby snack bar business) at the several theaters of the Centro Cultural Helénico. Fortunately, dealing with the hassles was well worth it, as Mexico City's abundant theatre offerings yielded numerous gems.

One of the season's finest plays was *Historias de animales*, performed in the diminutive Sala Rosario Castellanos in the Casa del Lago Juan José Arreola. Based on a story by Jaime Goded and adapted to theatre and directed by Edurne Goded, it was a stinging four-part farce which pummeled four different major aspects of Mexican society: government, the school system, the news media and commercialism. Those major categories, nevertheless, were merely the beginning, as within one hour it managed to skewer not just corrupt politicians, stupid teachers, self-interested reporters and hyper-materialist consumers, but also corrupt police officers and judges, bodyguards lacking brains but overly anxious for action, brutally incompetent medical doctors, outlandish sales sharks, dangerously incompetent drivers and gringo tourists toting monstrously large containers of beer, to mention a few of the most outstanding caricatures from the play. Several aspects of the play's technique were brilliant, starting with the fact that the cast consisted of only four actors who obviously played numerous roles. Their wardrobe changed



Historias de animales.

Photo by Timothy G. Compton.

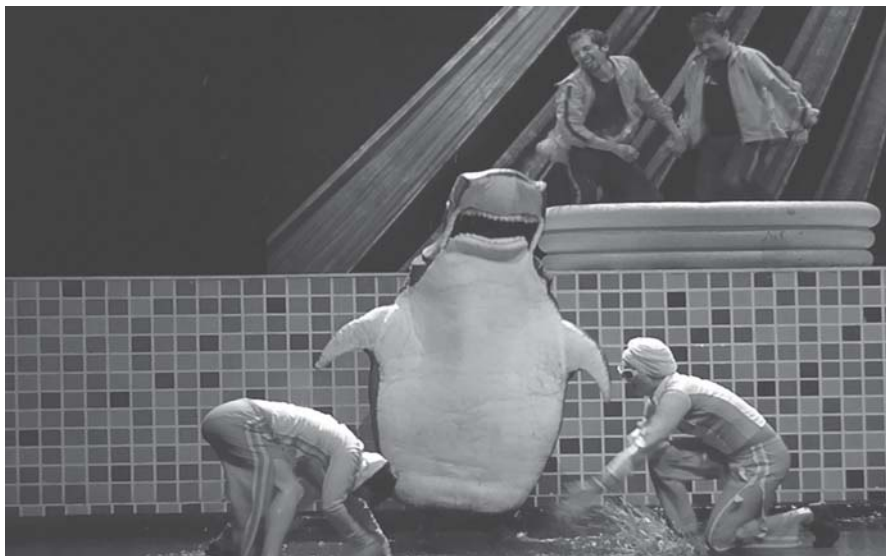
as they sped from role to role, but more importantly, their body language, facial expressions, voices, rhythms and attitudes transformed them convincingly and hilariously. All four actors gave outstanding performances, but Héctor Dávila and Oscar Leonardo Yoldi shined brightest, perhaps because their roles allowed it of them. Unlike other plays I have seen in the same space, *Historias de animales* was oriented lengthwise, creating a very shallow stage, room for only three rows of spectators, and remarkable proximity to the audience. On each end of

the actors' space was a pair of coat trees laden with clothes at the beginning of the performance. Each change of character took place in full audience view, as actors discarded costumes and exchanged them for new ones. By the end of the play, the coat trees were bare. The costumes were sometimes realistic, as in the case of the reporters and police officers, but sometimes farcical, as in the cases of the gringo in Bermuda shorts and the politician who wore an elephant head. All props for the play were also at stage ends, ranging from multi-purpose boxes with inner lights on wheels which served as cars and other things, noise-makers, oversized money, cameras, mirrors, saw handles (for plastic surgery), guns and suitcases. Between the coat trees, the stage seemed to be split into thirds, signaled with rectangles of light which often illuminated a third of the stage at a time. At times the actors worked alone, while other times monologues yielded to dialogue. The language of the play was fast, tongue-in-cheek and dense, leaving at least one spectator with the desire to see the play again to process more of it. Language echoing conventions from the mass media was among the richest, having great fun at the expense of news programs and television commercials. One such commercial was for an "Air-Brain Damage Kit," hawked by a woman who cheerfully declared: "Yo era una gorda, pero ahora soy popu-

lar.” The TV-watcher immediately called for the ridiculous product, which led to a string of disasters for her. The use of lights, constant flow of characters and frequent use of announcements either by the actors or over the loudspeakers reminded this spectator of viewing a circus, suggesting that portions of Mexican society have become sideshows worthy of the big top. *Historias de animales* was first-rate theatre, pertinent to Mexico, but in one of UNAM’s less-known theatre venues.

El cazador de gringos was performed only twice in the Helénico’s La Gruta theater by a visiting group from Mexicali, Baja California. Written by Daniel Serrano and directed by Ángel Norzagaray, this play was especially appropriate for a group from the border, as it highlighted absurdities stemming from that artificial line separating Mexico from the United States. The play turned the current paradigm on its head by featuring a Mexican determined to protect at least his stretch of the border from incoming Americans. He spouted about defending Mexico’s sovereignty, and about how when gringos cross the border, Mexicans let them pass without asking a thing, but when Mexicans cross the border to work and pay taxes, Americans interrogate them and treat them poorly. His wife tolerated his outbursts and brought him food so he could continue to guard his stretch of the border at gunpoint. When a US border patrol agent, who, ironically, was originally from Mexico, arrived to ask him to settle down and back off, the “cazador” nabbed him, put him in handcuffs, subjected him to a mock trial, beat him, and eventually shot him. The intense action received periodic comic relief by dialogue between an aged husband and wife sitting in their easy chairs far from the *cazador*’s compound. They discussed current events and reminisced, focusing on things wholly unconnected to border issues. The conversation was rich in that the *viejitos* communicated without even finishing sentences and managed to identify society ills without getting overly upset. The language of the *cazador* was rich in its ability to echo official rhetoric on border issues, but turned them on their head to “protect” Mexico. I cannot think of a more effective way than this play to show how outlandish some current border practices and policies have become, especially in this day of volunteer vigilante groups taking immigration matters into their own hands.

Croll, by Chilean-turned-Mexican Ernesto Anaya and directed by José Antonio Cordero, was one of the funniest plays of the year. I saw it in the Teatro Helénico after it had completed a successful outdoor run at UNAM’s Centro Cultural Universitario. Although the play’s subtitle did not appear on the program, it reveals a great deal about the play: “teatro para



Croll. Photo by Timothy G. Compton.

alberca con mucho estilo.” Indeed, the set, designed by Ingrid Sac, visually mimicked the conventions of swimming pools, with aqua-colored tiles. A “pool” only a few inches deep was near the audience, while an upper level gave the illusion that just beyond it was an olympic-sized pool. The first scene was a visual and verbal tour-de-force, as Enrique Arreola and Aurora Cano, sporting hilarious knee to tip-of-head swimming suits jousted for use of the middle lane of the pool for their training. It turned out, after lengthy discussion and corporal gyrations and exquisite timing between the pair, that they used to be a couple, and part of their conflict was the fact that the *nadadora* had achieved far more success than her male counterpoint. Their sparring alternated with scenes featuring a German soprano humiliated to be singing in Mexico and a Mexican violinist who tried to orient her to Mexican ways. The orientation sessions were hilarious, such as when he tried to explain why everything in Mexico starts late due to the “media hora de tolerancia,” why Mexico needs its own Virgin Mary and why Mexican politics work the way they do. Their discussions were occasionally interrupted by hysterical party music in German about Mexico, sometimes accompanied by images projected onto the side of the “pool,” and always accompanied by brilliantly ridiculous dancing by all four cast members, but particularly by Arreola and Cano, who would suddenly emerge in synchronous swimming/dance from

the “olympic pool.” Eventually the two worlds came together as the four were on a flight which crashed into the ocean, and they all found themselves on a tiny lifeboat. The women ended up dying after dancing with a shark, while the men decided to try to swim to safety using the “croll.” The acting of all four actors was superb, but Enrique Arreola was particularly outstanding. The choreography, music, visual effects and dialogue were delightful, and best of all, while the tone was farcical, *Croll* focused on items of great importance to Mexico, such as machismo, religion, government and societal conventions.

One other play merits mention as a masterpiece in adult theatre: Shakespeare’s *La comedia de las equivocaciones*, directed by Alberto Lomnitz and acted by members of the Liga Mexicana de la Improvisación. Although the plot was Shakespeare, this version of the play had been adapted



La comedia de las equivocaciones. Photo by Timothy G. Compton.

to Mexico, set in “Ciudad del norte,” a place with terrible government and public functionaries who worked only when enticed with a “mordida.” Despite these details, the characters retained their Shakespearian names and the comedy of errors referenced in the title unfolded as beautifully as in the original. Six actors took on all of the roles with incredible delineation of characters, thanks in part to wonderful costumes, but mostly thanks to the actors’ amazing ability to create different characters with their body language, voice and facial expression. In fact, I counted more than ten characters brilliantly played by Diego Jáuregui and almost ten played by Juan Carlos Vives. At different points, all six actors played the part of guard to the city, which gives an idea of the playful nature of the performance. The set design was simple, with two stone “walls” on either side of the stage, and a booth on wheels in the middle, which could be turned to any of the four sides to create different parts of the town, whether an immigration check point, an information booth, a market, the inside or outside of a pub, or a convent. Designed by Matías Gorlero, the set was exceptionally fun and efficient despite its simplicity. Along with *Croll*, *La comedia de las equivocaciones* was among the funniest plays I have ever seen.

Several other plays for adults had outstanding components, although to my eye they did not attain the rank of masterpieces. *Cuadros para una exposición perdida* was a set of five short plays packaged into a two-hour block at the off-the-beaten-path Tadeco theater. Four of the plays were written by Ilya Cazés, while the last was by Harold Pinter. Miguel Angel Flores directed four of the plays, while Margarita Hernández directed the other. The acting was very good, the plays focused on pertinent topics dealing various levels of relationships and the use of space in the black box theatre was very interesting. A set of instructions printed on the program made the play unique, so unique, in fact, that I include them in their entirety here:

1. *El espacio de la exposición es de libre tránsito.*
2. *Se debe buscar el mejor ángulo para ver el espectáculo.*
3. *Como espectador de la exposición busque en las sensaciones propias.*
4. *Permitase a sí mismo ‘meterse’ en el cuadro escénico.*
5. *No se inhiba, busque un lugar, muévase por el espacio en cada cuadro, no se quede sentado en un sitio, si no ve, por favor busque ver.*
6. *Experimente y no juzgue, piense, sienta que la mayoría son autorretratos.*

7. *Las gradas funcionan como gradas o como objetos.*
8. *No dé de comer a los actores.*
9. *Siempre recuerde que es una exposición teatralizada.*

Unfortunately, outside of shifting a few seats, spectators stayed largely in place during the performance I saw. In speaking with the director afterward, I found that the audience performance was typical, that no spectator the entire season had overcome audience conventions to join the actors on the stage for a perspective within the action. We missed a unique opportunity. The cast took a huge risk with every performance.

The graduating class of UNAM's Centro Universitario de Teatro performed *Obra negra* in the Foro del CUT. Written by Flavio González Mello and directed by Mauricio García Lozano, this play was a variation on the theme of Frankenstein, with the monster being an "Intelligent" building which had swallowed its inhabitants. During the play the audience, along with the characters, tried to figure out whether the characters were alive or dead, and what happened to the building. One of the play's finest features was a three-sided curtain of transparent beads about 15 feet tall. The curtain was beautiful in the way it responded to various lighting schemes. Unfortunately, much of the play seemed to be trying too hard – the characters were too outrageous, the costumes too freakish, the actors seemed to overact and the overall theme was too undefined. Oh, and the play went too long.

Carlota emperatriz was a beautiful play, although a tad stodgy for my taste, written and directed by Miguel Sabido in the sumptuous and venerable Teatro Hidalgo. Reminiscent of Usigli's *Corona de sombra*, this play featured Carlota in her later years, mired in a mental fog with moments of clarity. Mexicans gossiping about Carlota's personal life got the play going, and a poet/historian got after them and helped them to see Carlota as a historical character who loved Mexico and sacrificed for it. Jacqueline Andere, a legend in Mexican theatre, elegantly played Carlota. She received abundant applause when she first set foot on the stage as well as a long standing ovation at the end. The set and costumes were also extremely elegant, with gorgeous period dresses, sumptuous curtains, chandelier, throne and furniture. The theatrical techniques could have been interesting, but they lacked subtlety, as in the case of placing masks onto characters, changing the lights and playing music to signify Carlota's madness. So it may not have been avant-garde, but *Carlota emperatriz* was a lovely piece of commercial theatre which undoubtedly made a lot of money.

La boda by Bertolt Brecht, adapted by Raúl Zermeño, directed by Maricio García Lozano and performed by students of the CazAzul Artes Escénicas Argos school, played in UNAM's Santa Catarina theater as fourth in a five-part series of award-winning plays by university-level theatre students, and the acting was indeed well done. As the text called for, the characters were rotten to the core, turning a wedding party into a nightmare, but what made this performance noteworthy was the superb adaptation to Mexico and Mexican marriage customs, including decorations and foods which were all quintessentially Mexican.

Un mambo con La Catrina: 13 calaveras escénicas en tiempos de gobers preciosos was billed as an "Adaptación libre de *Bajo tierra* de David Olguín." Written and directed by Cordelia Dvorák, it premiered in Switzerland in late 2006 as part of a Swiss-Mexican festival. Like Olguín's original, this play featured José Guadalupe Posada and his assistant originally trying to escape death, but eventually falling in love with her and helping her to develop a new image – the Mexican image of death created by the real-life Posada during the Porfiriato. Visually this performance was a treat, featuring what seemed to be a walkway between life and death, as the action took place between spectators seated arena-style on the stage of the Helénico theater. At the ends of the runway were screens on which images were projected from time to time. The costumes were compelling, particularly of the Catrina and of the curious character Careonte, played by a dwarf, who was usually dressed like a dandy, but in one scene was a diminutive angel on roller skates. As the title hinted, the play occasionally included dancing and music, to which the actors sang live. Although this play had plenty to applaud, in the end I couldn't help but compare it to *Bajo tierra*, which I found more developed in its plot and character development.

Finally, I would note that *Vencer al Sensei*, which I highlighted in my Spring 2006 report, returned to a different stage (UNAM's Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz) in May of 2007, in a souped-up version called *Vencer al Sensei turbo*. In addition to adding a trio of new scenes, altering the plot-line slightly and getting new costumes, *Turbo* managed to place spectators even closer to the action and to its authentic samurai swords. In the 2006 version, the actors performed in a straight line with spectators on both sides. In the 2007 version, actors performed in a blocked X shape, with spectators jutting into the middle of the "stage" on four sides, so the flow of the action happened unpredictably all around them, making it an even more exciting and intimate event. Richard Viqueira and Mauricio E. Galaz were just as brilliant



Vencer and Sensei. Photo by Andrea López.

as last year, with incredibly exact acrobatics and timing, and the new actor in the role of the geisha, Rossana Vega, a dancer by profession, also added to this version of the play with some impressive “zapateo.”

The offerings in children’s theatre this season were among the strongest I have ever seen, starting with *El rey que no oía pero escuchaba*, performed by *Seña y verbo*, Mexico’s deaf theatre company. Perla Szuchmacher, who moved to Mexico from Argentina over twenty years ago, wrote the text and the company’s founder and director, Alberto Lomnitz, directed the play. During the spring season this play finished a highly successful commercial run in the Teatro Orientación and transitioned to performances for school groups. As with most of *Seña y verbo*’s plays, this one featured a mixture of hearing and non-hearing actors, with all dialogue performed in Mexican Sign Language by all actors, and hearing actors translating signs delivered by non-hearing actors. The plot centered on a historical situation Szuchmacher found in the Iberian Peninsula’s history, in which a non-hearing oldest son was passed over to become king. In the play, the hearing son who became king was selfish, lazy, reigned with an iron hand, and most importantly, did not listen to the people or his advisors, even though he could hear, to the detriment of the kingdom. When the older, non-hearing

son was eventually placed on the throne, he had the wisdom to listen, even though he couldn't hear, and the kingdom flourished. In addition to a lovely plot with a moral suitable to more than just children, this play delighted audience members of all ages in a number of ways. One of the most outstanding was the use of highly expressive oversized hats and wigs to transform the five actors into numerous characters. The headgear was on the stage on coat racks, so the actors could transition instantly from role to role. Another appealing technique was the extremely effective use of imaginary props for numerous scenes, such as for reading an edict, writing on a chalkboard, digging a hole, using a stethoscope, and best of all, for wonderful sword play. Audience members had to invent much of the play in their own minds. Although the basic set was simple, lighting bathed the large panels behind the actors in various lush, beautiful colors, to lovely effect. The actors played their parts with great energy and skill. This was yet another beautiful play by *Seña y verbo*, which is becoming one of Mexico's most consistently excellent theatre companies.

Harpist Mercedes Gómez Benet's first incursion into dramaturgy resulted in *De la oreja al corazón*, which was directed by Emmanuel Márquez and performed by Compañía Dívadlo, which specializes in puppet theatre. The puppets stole the show, although the set was expressive and versatile, the storyline about an orphan boy discovering and falling in love with music was lovely and the play's original music was beautiful (in many performances live). The 20 plus puppets were of various sizes, including adult-sized, child-sized, and marionette-sized. The small puppets functioned as typical marionettes, and the adult-sized puppets were compelling, with their removable heads, but the medium-sized puppets stole the show. Actors controlled them and spoke for them in full view of the audience, dressed in black, but with visible faces. Occasionally more than one actor was needed to make the puppets do their thing, and in some particularly expressive scenes three actors participated. It was particularly charming to see the same character emerge in all three sizes, to see the puppets do things in very human ways and to see puppet solutions to theatrical problems, such as representing a class full of students by a rack of clothing or representing death by having a puppet's heart flutter out of its body. Having the puppeteers partially visible throughout most of the play provoked an almost Brechtian feel, yet the characters were so well formed and the plot so compelling that *De la oreja al* a small group of musicians, including the playwright, performed the music

corazón was a very moving, beautiful play (with a nice website: <http://www.delaorejalcorazon.blogspot.com/>).

A third masterpiece of children's theatre was *Adiós, querido Cuco*, which has had successful runs in various venues in recent years and was part of the school theatre circuit during this season. Written by Bertha Hiriart and directed by Perla Szuchmacher, this was a warm play focusing on how to deal with death, in this case the death of a beloved pet dog. The acting was excellent, the costumes colorful and fun, but the set was one of the play's most outstanding elements. A fence stretched across the stage signifying the back yard of a home, but sections of the fence would rotate, revealing different spaces such as a park bench or a (vertical) bed, instantly transforming the dramatic space. The children in the audience were particularly responsive to this play, enthusiastically reacting and sometimes even trying to interact with characters on the stage.



De la oreja al corazón. Photo by Timothy G. Compton.



Adiós, querido cuco.
Photo by José Jorge Carreón.

It seems that almost every year *teatristas* express concerns about a dearth of good theatre in Mexico City, and this year was no exception. But as happens with almost as much frequency, I found in Mexico City's spring 2007 theatre season plenty to praise. Not all of its 100 plus plays were excellent or even good theatre, but the upper tier was top-notch.

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